

Veteran's wish shows love of Air Force

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RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas — Reid S. Wyant is dying. His daughter called me the other day looking for help putting together the items so that he could be buried in his Air Force service dress uniform. He served 30 years as an airman. And it seems he's still one of us.

I got to thinking. What makes a person who has lived life as a civilian since 1980 want to be buried in his uniform?

I like to think maybe Service Before Self gets into your blood. After all, retired Senior Master Sgt. Wyant

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switched his cancer treatment from Eglin Air Force Base not too long ago because the war was forcing them to cut back care, and he wanted the active-duty people to get taken care of first. "Always thinking of others," his daughter says.

His daughter—her name is Andrae Harris—is helping care for him even as he edges closer to the end. She helps him plan it all out. Arlington National Cemetery was overruled by his wife, who wants him for eternity closer to family. Details like that.

Andrae says she always knew her dad was a hero. He was awarded the Airman's Medal for saving three swimmers' lives "in front of my very eyes, without a care to his own safety." He almost lost his own life doing it, she says. And that pales in comparison to his courage facing his cancer. Sergeant Wyant might say it is the friends you find that make the Air Force something you want to be buried with. "I've never known anyone who did not like my dad," his daughter says.

A former commander, Col. Roger Andersen, still visits him at home. "They would both reenlist today," if they could, Andrae tells me. Reid Wyant's life with the Air Force

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began when the young Air Force had been around for just seven years. "His uncle was a rear admiral and told him to join the Air Force," Andrae says. Seems his uncle was a smart man. She says "He caught a bus to Pittsburgh and never looked back."

I think he's looking back now. Looking back on the people he met as a munitions maintenance specialist and first sergeant. Born and raised in Kitanning, Pa., he served in North Africa, in the '50s; Cambodia, Viet Nam, Laos and Korea in the '60s.

In 1971 he was in Thailand. And he was in plenty of stateside places in between. But no assignment was more important than the move from Denver to Bentwaters, England.

That's where a boy, dirt-poor and often mistreated by his grandfather, a guy who dropped out of school and put his kid brother through college — well, England is where he met his wife, Doreen. To hear Andrea tell it, her mom's whole family fell in love with him. As much, it seems, as he loved the Air Force.

Upon retirement from his second career he moved from Dallas to near Eglin where he fried fish and chicken for squadron picnics. And where a couple of years ago they first treated him for cancer. And it was to Eglin that he went recently with his family to get all of his affairs together and prepare a final will.

I have never met Sergeant Wyant. But I have worked with people just like

him every day of my 12 years in the Air Force. I have served with loyal members of every service. And I am off to Iraq soon to work again with the State Department and other agencies.

People tell me to keep my head down when I go to Iraq. Instead I think I'll hold my head high, out of respect for people like Sergeant Wyant and all those he represents, like my own dad, and my father-in-law.

When Andrae asked him the other day why the service dress uniform for the burial, he said that is what he has always worn for important events, and he wanted his family to recognize him. His sense of humor is still healthy.

Maybe one day, I will ask to be buried in my service dress uniform, like Senior Master Sgt. Reid S. Wyant wants to be, "with full military honors."

In his case, the honor will be ours.

Author's Note: Retired Senior Master Sgt. Reid S. Wyant died Feb. 1 with most of his family around him. He died quietly and without much pain. He had time to tell his family goodbye. He knew it was time.

His son called me today to tell me the news and to thank everyone who contacted them in the past few weeks. He wanted to thank Chief Master Sgt. Malcolm McVicar, at Scott AFB, Ill., who mailed several uniform items, and to Senior Master Sgt. Fred Warner, at Maxwell AFB, Ala., who put together an entire uniform, ribbons, brass and all, and then drove with his family to Florida to deliver it in person.

Needless to say the family was overwhelmed by the love that everyone who read about their father showed to them by contacting them or me.

Editor's Note: Sergeant Wyant is pictured with his wife, Doreen.



HE WHO HONORS ME,
HIM WILL I HONOR



SERVICE BEFORE SELF